Empathy in Healthcare: How Effective Communication Can Provide Better Health Care

Throughout the ages, nurses have played a huge part in the health system to provide impeccable care for all patients. In saying this, if a Registered Nurse (RN) has poor communication skills, it could drastically affect the care a patient receives as the environment can be extremely overwhelming. This essay will discuss why effective communication is vital for a RN and different strategies to improve the relationship between nurses and patients. It will also outline potential barriers that poor communication skills display, and the risks associated with poor communication as an RN.

Effective communication is more than just an exchange of information, it's about conveying a clear message and intentions for the information to be passed on from one person or organisation to another and can be done through many different formats (Robinson et al., 2019). Verbal communication is dependent on word of mouth (Professional Healthcare INC, 2019) and also encompasses Non-verbal features such as gestures, tone of voice, rate and volume of speech, facial expressions, eye contact and body language (Bezdikian et al., 2007). Written communication is passed on in many different formats, such as email, letter, text message or reports. It is perfect for long distance communication across a group of people and is a permanent reminder for people to see all the time (Sharma, 2015). Alongside written communication, visual communication allows the delivery of information through visual elements like graphs and charts to convey a message to an audience (Freeman, 2019) which is perfect for office spaces or presentation because all the information is easy to understand for as many people and cultures as possible. This is why in public spaces when information is displayed a picture follows the information, for example NO smoking signs and Disabled parking spots have appropriate signage. Knowing and practicing these communication techniques are important for RNs to acquire as early in their careers as possible to avoid miscommunication physically or verbally, so that health workers can provide the best possible care through clear communication (Professional Healthcare INC, 2019). RNs who apply effective communication skills into their own health practice not only implement workplace practices to improve their own practice but gain the trust of their patients through the minimised risks of medical errors and centring their problem-solving skills around patient satisfaction (Lang, 2012). Not only this, but effective communication is a part of the Australia Commission on Safety and Quality in Health Care (ACSQHC) 's safety standard and is practiced through Monitoring the effectiveness of clinical communication and associated processes, Implementing strategies to improve clinical communication and associated processes and Reporting on the effectiveness and outcomes of clinical communication processes (ACSQHC, 2012). With the support of the proper legislation, nurses can actively practice effective communication, allowing them to develop their nursing practice and patient rapport. Mills (2019) discussed that patient rapport not only can get patients to open up about their lives and draw connections but can drastically improve patient care. RNs must apply a few different strategies in order to deliver individualised patient care and build rapport; Always maintain good eye contact, show empathy, have open communication, actively listen and always keep your word. These attributes have contributed to patient-centred care, which has only recently gained attention in healthcare as a way to engage with patients to increase their recovery time through mutual understanding of goals and involving patients in the health care process (Paget et al., 2011).

As previously mentioned, Verbal Communication and all that it encompasses play a huge role in developing relationships between RNs and their patients. However, when a patient has difficulties speaking the same language/s of nurses on staff, it can become a challenge for RNs to build the therapeutic nurse-patient relationship needed in order to provide the very best care. Galinatio et al. (2016) discussed how patients with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) reported more dissatisfaction with their care, due to not being able to receive patient centred care. RN's must utilise all communication techniques and have appropriate understanding of how these techniques can be implemented in a situation such as this to assist and support patients to the best of their ability. Visual aids could be beneficial in this situation alongside using a bilingual family member or a hospital translator in order to achieve a positive outcome for the patient they are caring for (Galinatio et al., 2016).

Questioning is a verbal communication skill that can direct the attention to the patient and allows nurses to find out more than just the medical needs of a patient (Stein-Parbury, 2018). There are several questioning strategies nurses can use depending on the situation they are in. Stein-Parbury (2018) describes the first strategy as Closed ended questioning, which are basic on the surface questions answered in one-word responses. These questions are excellent for retrieving information about the patient and allows a nurse to analyse the cognitive function of the patient, however, offer little scope for engaging in a conversation where more information could be obtained (Stein-Parbury, 2018). The next strategy Stein-Parbury (2018) discusses is open-ended questions. These questions like "How are you feeling today" are invitations for the patient to open up to the nurse and allows new interactions but aren't always useful when needing immediate straight forward replies. The final strategy is Focused questioning, which is a mixture of the first two strategies to allow for a comprehensive explanation of a patient's medical details (Stein-Parbury, 2018). The above strategies allow nurses to tailor patient care to achieve the best possible outcome.

Empathy is defined as the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences by imagining what it would be like to be in that person's situation (Cambridge University Press, 2019). In order to provide the most effective patient-centred care, empathy is necessary for a nurse to connect with patients and can be more effective for a patient's recovery than technical ability (Ameritech, 2016). The ability to exude empathy is what makes allows patients to engage in life-saving conversations and helps facilitate connections with other health professionals and empower patients to treat themselves to accelerate healing (Ficarra, 2010) making Empathic ability is fundamental to connecting and building therapeutic relationships and is a prerequisite for high quality healthcare (Stein-Parbury, 2018).

While Non-Verbal Communication can help clarify the words being said to fit into the context of conversations, they can also allow be interpreted different ways by different people depending on religion, culture and other lifestyle factors (Stonehouse, 2017). Touching is a useful tool to convey messages of support and attention when used appropriately (Raut, 2017) and is inevitable as a healthcare worker (Stonehouse, 2017). Meaning all touching must remain professional and appropriate for all cultures and genders, as touching can easily be misinterpreted to become more sexual in nature (Stonehouse, 2017). From person to person, touching can be misconstrued to mean a variety of different thing depending on a patients cultural beliefs. For example, in some Asian cultures, only a select few adults are allowed to touch a child's head and some cultures believe that souls can leave the body when someone touches you, banning all forms of touch in their daily life (Stonehouse, 2017). These beliefs can be easily identified by asking a few open-ended questions before physical examination, saving

the risk of upsetting patients before even beginning to develop the crucial nurse-patient relationship required to speed up healing and have open conversations about their health.

Eye contact is fundamental for social interaction (Akechi et al., 2013) and is when a speaker looks directly into the eyes of the person they are speaking to when directing a message toward a person and as a level of communication (Yunos, 2019). Eye contact can be reassuring for a patient as it is a sign that their RN is a good listener and will listen to all issues they may have (Yunos, 2019). In many Eastern and Caribbean Cultures, making eye contact for extended periods of time can be perceived as hostile or impolite (Bauer, 2015). When a RN uses eye contact correctly by asking some questions about what's appropriate, it can create a respectful nurse-patient relationship, allowing the patient to feel as though they can communicate their health problems.

In conclusion, this essay discussed how different communication techniques such as Questioning, Empathy and Visual aids can improve the patient-nurse relationship and how it can drastically improve the care a patient receives while in a RNs care. Touch and Eye contact were outlined as Non-verbal barriers when not taking into account religion, culture and gender. Practicing effective communication as an RN has been proven to have several benefits for patients and nurses alike and allows RNs to provide the best possible care for all.

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